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ABSTRACT

The multi-faceted assessment of the teaching of religious history in the elementary and secondary schools of Indiana developed from a need for the assessment, a concept and procedure for the assessment, and the applications to educational practice. Textbooks have neglected religious history, and a national movement exists to improve the curricular status of religion. Documentation of the status of religion in elementary and secondary school history and social studies courses needs to be done in Indiana. In conceptualizing the proposed assessment, four types of questions signify the major categories: (1) questions about the extent and quality of coverage of religious history in textbooks; (2) questions regarding the place of religious history in the published frameworks and guides for the curricula of elementary and secondary schools; (3) questions pertaining to the place of religious history in the education and certification of teachers; and (4) questions dealing with the attitudes and practices of key persons about the place of religious history in the school curriculum. A procedure for developing the assessment and final report derives from the four types of questions. The possibility exists for the assessment to increase public interest in the subject, arouse public interest groups to exert pressure for curricular reform, and provide a baseline for curriculum improvement. (CK)

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A PROPOSAL FOR ASSESSING THE TEACHING OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY IN INDIANA SCHOOLS

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by John J. Patrick

The proposition of this paper is singular and direct: The Indiana Humanities Council, in concert with other concerned educators, should sponsor a multi-faceted assessment of the teaching of religious history in the elementary and secondary schools of Indiana. The three sections of this paper treat the (1) need or rationale for the proposed assessment, (2) conceptualization and procedures of the proposed assessment, and (3) the applications to educational practice of the proposed assessment.

1. The Need

Religion is and has been an important dimension of human societies throughout the world. One cannot authentically and accurately teach and learn history without emphasizing the religious beliefs and practices of the world's civilizations, and one cannot realistically and comprehensively study human behavior in our contemporary world without ample attention to the role of religion in society. Thus religion should have a prominent place in the social studies curriculum of elementary and secondary schools. Does it?

There is justification for prevalent claims that religious history has been woefully neglected in the K-12 curriculum of schools. Various appraisals of school textbooks indicate underemphasis and misrepresentation of religious history. "These texts simply do not treat religion as a significant element of American life,"

reports Tony Podesta, on the basis of a comprehensive study of school textbooks (1986, p. 50). This finding has been replicated in several other studies and reports (Gaustad, 1992 and Piediscalzi, 1993).

Further, there is evidence that neglect of religious history in textbooks reflects similar neglect in the curriculum frameworks and guides of school districts and state departments of education. For example, the New York State Social Studies Review and Development Committee produced in 1991 a curriculum guide that celebrates diversity and multicultural education. Religious diversity, however, is not included in the recommendations of this report on teaching and learning social studies.

Are the widespread claims and examples about curricular neglect of religious history accurate descriptions of national patterns in elementary and secondary schools? Do they apply to teaching and learning about religion in Indiana schools in grades K-12? Given the importance of religion as a key dimension of history, there is need to document accurately the status of this subject in elementary and secondary school history and social studies courses in Indiana (and elsewhere, too). There is need for a well-designed survey that assesses the place of religious history in the K-12 curriculum of Indiana schools.

A final and compelling reason for assessing the teaching of religious history in Indiana schools is provided by the current national movement to improve the curricular status of this important facet of the human experience. Prominent associations of educators, such as the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), have issued bulletins and reports that recommend renewed curricular emphasis on

religious history and provide guidelines for teaching this subject. For example, see the ASCD bulletin by Charles Haynes (1990) and the report of the Religion in the Schools Committee of the NCSS (1990). In addition, prominent state departments of education, such as California and North Carolina, have issued curriculum frameworks and reports that stress the importance of teaching and learning about religion in history and our contemporary society. See, for example, the History-Social Science Framework for California's Public Schools, K-12 (1987) and the report of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction's Committee on Placement of Religion in the Social Studies Curriculum (1989), which recommend a prominent place for religious history in the school curriculum.

The projects and publications of the First Liberty Institute of George Mason University also are indicative of the new wave of enthusiasm for teaching about religion in the history and contemporary societies of our world. The principles and positions of the First Liberty Institute are presented in a booklet, Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers. A primary principle is the constitutional protection for teaching and learning about religion (not religious indoctrination or proselytization) in public school history, social studies, or literature courses. The First Liberty Institute emphasizes, for example, the position of the U.S. Supreme Court, which was expressed eloquently by Justice Tom Clark, "It might be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of

education, may not be effectively consistent with the First Amendment" (Abington School District v. Schempp, 374 U.S. 203, 1963).

The current national movement to improve teaching about religion in schools is an indicator of opportunity for curricular assessment and reform. People would seem to be interested in knowing the extent to which proposed curricular reforms concerning religious history, for example, have or have not been taken up by their local school districts or state education departments. To what extent have Indiana schools been part of a lamentable national pattern of neglect and misrepresentation of religion in history and our contemporary society? To what extent have Indiana schools been part of the incipient national reawakening to the importance of teaching and learning about religion in public schools? A systematic state-wide assessment is needed to provide answers to these important questions.

2. Conceptualization and Procedures

Four types of questions signify the major categories in conceptualization of the proposed assessment. The first type would be questions about treatment of religious history in the most extensively used textbooks in grades 4 (state history), 5 (U.S. history), 6 and 7 (world cultures), 8 (U.S. history), and in high school courses in world history (usually 10th grade) and U.S. history (usually 11th grade). These questions would pertain to the extent and quality of coverage of religious history in the textbooks. These questions would yield data about the strengths and weaknesses of textbook coverage of religious history. Since textbooks are the dominant instructional materials in schools, answers to these questions would reveal much about the extent and quality of coverage of religious history in the

school curriculum. The data pertinent to the first type of questions would be obtained from systematic content analyses of three widely used textbooks at each grade level of the assessment.

The second type of questions in this proposed study would be on the place of religious history in the published frameworks and guides for the curricula of elementary and secondary schools. Data gathered in response to these questions would reveal adequacies and deficiencies about the place of religious history in the formal curricula of Indiana schools. These data would be gathered through systematic content analysis of curricular documents of the Indiana Department of Education and of representative school districts throughout the state. These school districts would be selected to be representative samples of different regions and communities of the state.

The third type of questions for this survey study would pertain to the place of religious history in the education and certification of teachers. Is the study of religious history part of the pre-service education of social studies teachers? Is it required for certification? If so, what is the extent and quality of the education on religious history in the preparation and certification of teachers? These kinds of questions would yield data about the quality of pre-service education of social studies and history teachers on one important dimension of world history and United States history. These data would be obtained through examination of documents on teacher education requirements of the Indiana Department of Education and of the universities that educate teachers for Indiana schools.

The fourth type of question designed for this assessment would pertain to the attitudes and practices of key persons about the place of religious history in the

school curriculum. The respondents to these questions would include representative samples of teacher educators, elementary and secondary school teachers, elementary and secondary school principals, and school board members. These samples of respondents would answer questionnaires on their opinions about the importance of religious history in the curriculum and how this subject should be treated in classrooms. In addition, representative samples of teacher educators and pre-college teachers would be asked questions about instructional practices, about how much and how they treat religious history in their classroom activities and assignments. These kinds of questions would provide data on the opinions, perceptions, and practices of Indiana educators about the importance and treatment of religious history in the school curriculum. These data would be gathered through systematic administration of questionnaires to representative samples of all categories of respondents: elementary and secondary school teachers and administrators, teacher educators, and school board members. Both positive and negative examples would be gathered from the various categories of respondents about teaching religious history.

The proposed assessment, based on the four types of questions discussed in the preceding paragraphs, would be conducted according to the following general procedures.

First, a concept paper would be drafted that sets forth the essential elements and design of the proposed assessment.

Second, the concept/design paper would be submitted to a panel of reviewers for criticism and validation.

Third, the paper would be revised, based on constructive criticism of

reviewers, and validated by the panel of reviewers.

Fourth, copies of the finished concept/design paper would be submitted to potential funders of the study and funds would be obtained.

Fifth, the various operations of the study would be carried out in order to gather and interpret data and answer the four types of questions of this assessment.

Sixth, a comprehensive report of the study and its findings would be drafted and submitted to the panel of reviewers for criticism and validation.

Seventh, the project final report would be revised, based on constructive criticisms, and validated by the review panel.

Eighth, the final report, in comprehensive and executive summary formats, would be widely distributed throughout Indiana and to interested parties in the national and international communities.

3. Uses of the Assessment

The final report of this proposed assessment would have three major uses or applications. First, this kind of document invariably increases public interest on the main themes of the report. So, one can presume that a widely distributed report of the survey findings would focus public attention on the need to improve the teaching of religious history.

Second, public interest groups might be aroused to exert pressure for curricular reform on school district officials and state education department officials. Public groups, acting for the public good, would have solid evidence and reasons to support their calls for educational improvement.

Third, a properly designed and executed assessment would provide baselines for curricular improvement. Knowledge of current conditions is a prerequisite to effective and desired change. The kind of study proposed in this paper can provide a realistic description of the status quo, which is necessary for satisfactory curriculum reform. If we would improve the way things are, we must first know these things. Otherwise, we risk making inadvertent and foolish changes based on well-intentioned but ignorant perceptions and desires.

The importance of religious history in the school curriculum should be beyond dispute among properly informed educators. Our goal should be to influence general acceptance of the following position expressed by the Religion in the Schools Committee of the National Council for the Social Studies. This NCSS committee proclaimed (1990, p. 92) that, "Knowledge about religions is not only a characteristic of an educated person but is also absolutely necessary for understanding and living in a world of diversity. . . . If the public schools are to provide students with a comprehensive education in the social studies, academic study about religion should be part of the curriculum." A suitable project, in line with national trends and concerns expressed by the NCSS, is a multi-faceted assessment of the teaching of religious history in the elementary and secondary schools of Indiana.

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